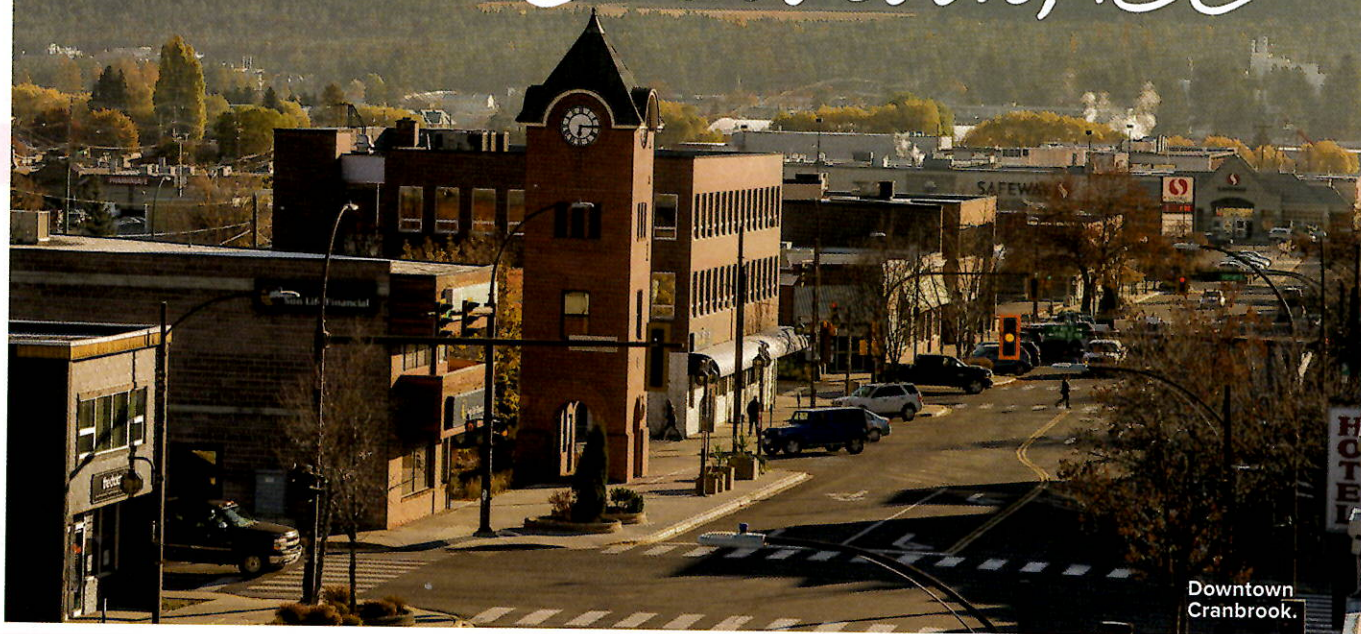


Finding a Home in

By Lola Augustine Brown

Cranbrook, BC

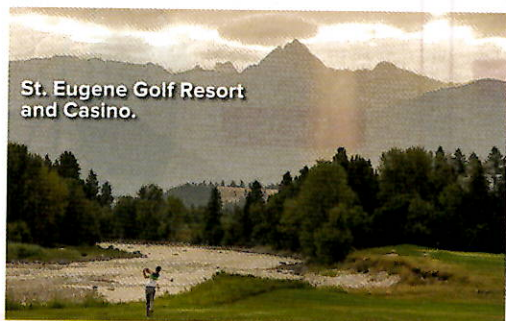


The comforts of civilization without the smog and congestion, plus thousands of acres of wilderness playground practically at your doorstep, all against a magnificent mountain backdrop: if that sounds like your idea of a retirement paradise, Cranbrook, BC, is ideal for you. And that's without considering the supports available for seniors (awareness of age-related issues is acute in Cranbrook, since 26 per cent of the population is 55 or older).

Located at the southern end of the valley where the Rockies and Purcell mountain ranges meet, Cranbrook (population: 20,075) is the largest community in the East Kootenays, a wedge of land within the \vee formed by the convergence of the Columbia and Kootenay rivers in the southwestern corner of British Columbia. The area is just as visually stunning as it sounds. "The scenery is to die for," says Doug Newberry, who moved there from rural Manitoba in 2016 and is now the vice-president of Cranbrook Age Friendly, a group of volunteers from various service groups working together to make life better for seniors.

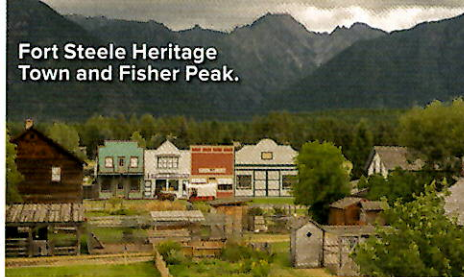
Within that landscape (which includes four provincial parks within a five-to-30-minute drive) are places to pursue practically every outdoor activity imaginable, from world-class fishing and camping to kayaking and whitewater rafting. Young retirees Kyla and Blake Knull, for example, love to go exploring. "My husband is in a wheelchair, so we have a side-by-side all-terrain vehicle [ATV]," she says. "We can access Crown land all the way up the mountainside—thousands of hectares—plus a number of different lakes."

Several trail systems—including one maintained specifically for vehicles such as ATVs and snowmobiles, another dedicated to mountain biking, and two converted railbeds (one a paved path connecting Cranbrook and Kimberley)—provide plenty of opportunities for walking, running, biking, in-line skating, snowshoeing, and horseback riding. Alpine skiers can reach eight world-class resorts





Three Bars Ranch near Cranbrook.



Fort Steele Heritage Town and Fisher Peak.



Teepees at Ktunaxa Interpretive Centre.



The Cranbrook airport.

Photos: Destination BC/Kari Medig (ranch, Fort Steele Heritage Town, Canadian Museum of Rail Travel, and Fire Hall Kitchen & Tap), Janice Strong (airport), and Aboriginal Tourism Association of BC/Abby Cooper (Ktunaxa Interpretive Centre).

along the circular Powder Highway route within five hours, the nearest being in Kimberley, just 20 minutes away.

Golf courses are even more abundant, with six within easy reach of downtown Cranbrook alone. And city-managed facilities support a multitude of other physical activities, including pickleball, curling, indoor walking, swimming, fitness classes, hockey, skating, squash, racquetball, and gardening in the public produce garden.

Cranbrook offers a similarly rich array of arts, culture, heritage, and learning, too. “There’s always something to do,” says Annette De Reaume, a recent transplant from the island of Jersey (off the coast of France), who was drawn to Cranbrook by the idea of a country lifestyle close to the city. A community theatre group stages productions in an 83-seat historic building, and a 4,624-seat arena and a 600-seat theatre showcase diverse live entertainment, including recent concerts by Reba McEntire and Canadian jazz pianist Michael Kaeshammer.

Festivals feature a variety of free diversions, including Saturday summer evening concerts in Rotary Park and numerous events during Sam Steele Days (named for the legendary gold-rush-era Mountie), such as a parade, live music, a logger sports show, and wiener-dog races. You can step into the past at the Cranbrook History Centre (a highlight is a collection of luxury early-20th-century train cars) and at nearby Fort Steele Heritage Town (its origins date back to the gold rush) or experience Indigenous culture at the Ktunaxa (First Nations)

Interpretive Centre (part of the deluxe St. Eugene Golf Resort and Casino). And you can keep your mind fit by taking one of the plethora of classes (from starting a podcast to silversmithing) offered through College of the Rockies, the art museum, the

public library, the seniors’ hall, and the parks and recreation department.

Cranbrook’s independent food scene “is amazing,” says Kyla Knull, from weekly farmers’

markets in the summer and fall to St. Eugene’s WineSpring festival and establishments such as the Fire Hall Kitchen & Tap (in a beautifully restored fire hall). Non-chain local stores make shopping surprisingly good, too. For instance, local retailers make a point of stocking sizes to fit Knull’s husband, Blake, who’s six foot five, and consequently, “I can get stuff here that I can’t even get in the big city,” she says. (If you need to get to a big city, however, flights depart daily for Calgary, Vancouver, and Kelowna from the Canadian Rockies airport, just 15 minutes from town. Getaways closer to home include Banff, Nelson, and Radium Hot Springs (BC), and Lethbridge, AB.

Locals are a cordial bunch. “The people here are terrific,” says De Reaume, adding that she and her family have made several friends since their September 2018 arrival. “Whenever our community suffers a tragedy, there’s tremendous community support,” Knull says. “People drop what they’re doing to help. That’s a part of Cranbrook that shines.”

What about more pragmatic considerations? “Health care was our priority,” Doug Newberry says, “and the regional hospital for the East Kootenay area is located in Cranbrook.” The 77-bed referral centre serves a catchment area of roughly 80,000 people.

Having worked with seniors for many years, Newberry recognizes the importance of public transportation, “and Cranbrook has a good transit system,” which includes handyDART, an accessible, door-to-door transit system with a \$3 round-trip fare. There’s also a wide range of services available for people with mobility challenges, including a frozen-meal delivery service, book and DVD delivery from the public library, and volunteer programs to assist with everything from grocery shopping and snow removal to navigating the health-care system.

On the housing front, the vacancy rate is low, and modular homes get snapped up almost as soon as they go on the market, but the number of homes (detached houses, townhouses, and condos) for sale increased by more than 64 per cent between August 2018 and August 2019, and in 2018, the average selling price was \$334,823. Newberry, who sits on the city planning committee, says plans are under way to expand the capacity of senior housing facilities by more than 250 units over the next two years.

If you’re a retiree pondering a move to Cranbrook, “Do it!” Knull says. “Come and enjoy the golf, the hot springs, the mountains, the air, and even the animals—you’ll wake up in the morning and have deer in your backyard.” ■



Canadian Museum of Rail Travel.



Fire Hall Kitchen & Tap.